Sree Kulathoor Kolathukara Shiva Temple

PART I

Introduction

The history of Sree Kulathoor Kolathukara Shiva Temple and the Velivilakam (formerly Kolothu/Kolathukara) family constitutes a significant yet understudied component of Travancore's socio-cultural past. Situated in Thiruvananthapuram, the temple occupies a central place not only in the religious life of the region but also in the intellectual, industrial, and political heritage of southern Kerala. The temple's later association with Sree Narayana Guru, particularly through his installation of the Śiva idol and his composition of the *Kolatireshastavam*, further situates its history within the wider narrative of Kerala's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century renaissance. The family's early involvement in textile production, its longstanding association with Travancore royalty, and its participation in military and administrative affairs underscore the depth of its regional influence during the pre-modern era.

This study reconstructs, in full narrative form, the documented and inherited accounts surrounding the origins of the temple, the evolution of the family, their interactions with Travancore state power, and the major religious, social, and political transformations spanning from the twelfth century to the early twentieth century.

I. Formation and Early History of the Kulathoor (Kolothu) Family

The origins of the Kulathoor family—known historically as the Kolothu or Kolathukara lineage and later as the Velivilakam tharavad—extend deep into Travancore's pre-modern past. Historically affluent and influential, the family established itself as a major landholding and industrial house, particularly renowned for its weaving and textile production. Their settlement near Parvathy Puthanar, a canal constructed for transport, enabled the development of an extensive commercial network. The family's economic prominence secured royal recognition; Travancore rulers conferred special privileges, acknowledging the family's contributions to textile commerce and their central role in regional industry.^1

The eighteenth-century agreements between Travancore and European trading powers, especially the British East India Company, depended heavily on the region's textile output. In this commercial environment, the Velivilakam family became indispensable. They relocated and settled skilled weavers and laboring communities in the Kulathoor area, providing land, housing, and security, thereby forming a semi-urban production zone. A Devi temple was also established near the tharavad to serve as the spiritual center for the community.

The family's cultural capital was extensive. Its members were well-versed in Sanskrit, Tamil, Malayalam, and, owing to commercial necessities, English and Hindustani. Several members were esteemed practitioners of Ayurveda and astronomy, positioning the tharavad not only as an industrial power but also as a house of learning and scholarship.

The family expanded rapidly, establishing subsidiary households throughout the region. Oral and documentary sources maintain that most current inhabitants of the wider Kulathoor area trace their ancestry directly or indirectly to this original lineage.^2

II. Socio-Cultural Influence and the Guru's Presence

The connection between the Velivilakam family and Sree Narayana Guru was both historical and personal. The Guru's mother maintained kinship ties with the family, and he had been familiar with the region since childhood. During the early phase of his reformist career, the influential chief of the Velivilakam household invited the Guru to reside in Kulathoor, offering hospitality and constructing a residence for him. Objects used by the Guru—his bed, walking stick, and chair—were preserved within the household, signalling the deep reverence the family held for him.

The temple's transformation occurred during this period. The local populace had developed fear toward the existing Bhagavathi shrine, particularly on ritual days such as Tuesdays and Fridays. To alleviate these anxieties and promote a more liberal religious outlook, the Guru recommended replacing the Devi idol with a Śiva linga. The family organized and executed the installation ceremonies, and this became the **second instance** of Sree Narayana Guru performing a Shiva *pratiṣṭhā*.^3

This re-consecration marked a turning point in the temple's development and inaugurated a new phase of religious identity in the region.

III. The Renaissance Period and Educational Foundations

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed the backdrop of Kerala's intellectual renaissance. The Velivilakam family's activities aligned closely with this wider reformist movement. Near the temple premises, the family founded a Sanskrit school, situated at the present-day site of the higher secondary school campus. The original house where the Guru resided stood directly before the school building. Despite subsequent changes, a curious historical detail endures: no new structure has ever been erected on the exact site of the old residence, for reasons that remain obscure.

After the Guru's installation of the Śiva idol in 1893, a new residence was constructed near the present school gate. Over time, management of the temple transitioned from hereditary family control to a public trust, in accordance with the Guru's egalitarian principles. To support temple operations, the family dedicated income from approximately six acres of paddy land, whose yield was intended to cover ritual and maintenance expenses. These lands were later absorbed into the Technopark development zone, reflecting the rapid modernization of the region.

Following India's independence, the earlier Sanskrit school and adjoining plots were donated by the family to the Kerala government. Subsequent state acquisition incorporated the remaining lands for educational development, completing a major twentieth-century transition from private hereditary control to public institutional administration.

IV. Early Historical Trajectory and Royal Connections

Historical accounts trace the family’s provenance to earlier centuries and highlight its connections with the Kolathiri royal lineage. Political alliances between Travancore and Kolathunad were traditionally reinforced through child adoption practices into the Travancore royal household. During the 1780s, as part of a formal agreement between Travancore and the Kolathiri king aimed at modernizing textile production, a royal delegation from Kolathunad migrated southward and established a textile factory at Kulathoor. The residence constructed for the royal group was referred to as *Kolothu*—a term historically used for royal mansions, akin to *kovilakam* or *kottaram*. The surrounding locality consequently came to be known as Kolothukara.^4

The family, drawing upon its royal descent and industrial expertise, constructed the original temple dedicated to Kali or Porkali near their residence. By the 1880s, the progressive elders of the house resolved to replace the ferocious war-goddess deity with a Śiva idol, emphasizing scholarship and spiritual pursuit over ritual appeasement. Palm-leaf manuscripts preserved within the temple record these decisions as part of the family’s long-standing reformist ethos.

In subsequent years, the demolition of the ancestral residence for public educational development revealed ancient relics, though the extent of their preservation remains uncertain.

This early period also highlights the family’s connection with regional military infrastructure, which will be examined in the next section.

PART II (Pages 4–6)

V. Strategic Geography, Military Presence, and Regional Importance

The geographic position of Kulathoor endowed the region with enduring military and political significance. Archival references and family records indicate that the area served as a strategic point for troop movements, defensive positioning, and supply routes in various phases of Kerala’s pre-modern warfare. Its location north of Akkulam Lake, flanked by elevated terrain, created a natural defensive envelope. Any military force entering Thiruvananthapuram from the coastline or the northern passes would have to negotiate these barriers, granting the Kulathoor region considerable tactical value.^5

The area offered access to multiple routes. Forces stationed at Kulathoor could traverse Akkulam Lake and proceed directly toward the western entrance of the Thiruvananthapuram fort. Alternatively, small pathways running along the lake’s eastern boundary offered opportunities for rapid movements toward Ulloor, facilitating ambushes or harassment strategies against troops approaching from the north. The marshlands surrounding the lake created additional obstacles, but experienced local contingents could maneuver through these waterscapes with relative ease.

Historical references further suggest that this landscape played a role during the twelfth century, a period marked by conflicts between the Chola empire and Kerala’s rulers. Temples at Attinkuzhi and Kushamuttom, both located near the

Velivilakam family’s landholdings, appear to have functioned as military assembly or barrack sites. Oral accounts and remnants of engraved stones in adjacent paddy fields, situated above the surrounding ground level, indicate the presence of ancient fortified or ritual-military zones. These stones, bearing symbols and marks, were historically regarded with fear and avoided by local residents. The area was later transformed entirely when acquired for the Technopark development project in 1998, resulting in the destruction of its rivers, canals, and archaeological features.^6

The family’s landholdings in Kallingal and Attinkuzhi expanded significantly over centuries. Between the early modern period and the early twentieth century, more than 200 acres of land were under the control of the Velivilakam lineage. Shifts in inheritance patterns—characterized by a distinctive matrilineal system that included not only the daughters of female members but the granddaughters of female descendants—contributed to gradual fragmentation. By the mid-twentieth century, only a fraction of the original holdings remained.

These circumstances illustrate the family’s long-term involvement in the military, administrative, and economic life of the region.

VI. Military Conflicts and the Mughal/Mongol Incursion

One of the most dramatic episodes associated with the Velivilakam family concerns their role in repelling the Mughal (or Mongol) incursion during the reign of Uma Amma Thampuratti. Historically recorded in palace and *mathilakam* archives, this episode describes an invading force that camped at Manakkad, outside the Travancore fort, and plundered the surrounding countryside.^7

In response to this crisis, the Rani invited a prince from Kolathunad, Sri Veerakerala Varma, who arrived with a military contingent composed primarily of Thiyya warriors. The combined Travancore and Kolathunad forces established strategic headquarters at the Nedumangad Palace and Kilimanoor Kovil. When the Mughal forces moved northward toward Varkala, the Travancore-Kolathunad alliance enacted a two-pronged strategy. One contingent crossed the Akkulam Lake and advanced westward through Kulathoor toward the heart of the Mughal encampment, while a second contingent marched directly from Nedumangad.

This dual maneuver proved decisive. The Mughal camp was overrun and routed. The fleeing forces, attempting to retreat through Kazhakuttom, were ambushed at Kallingal—territory under the Velivilakam family—and ultimately annihilated. The operation was led in part by the regional chieftain of Koloothu (Kulathoor), underscoring the family’s longstanding military authority.^8

Before the campaign began, ritual observances were held at the Kolathukara Bhagavathi Temple and at the Attinkuzhi Bhagavathi Temple, illustrating the integration of spiritual and military practice in pre-modern Kerala. Tradition further records that a distinguished monk from the family was later memorialized through the installation of the Alavaran Mahadevan idol at Trippadapuram Temple.

VII. Succession Crisis and the Marthanda Varma Conflict

The Velivilakam family’s fortunes became entangled in the succession crisis following the death of Raja Rama Varma, preceding the reign of Marthanda

Varma. Though Marthanda Varma ultimately ascended to the throne, he was not the immediate heir; two individuals stood before him in the line of succession—his elder brother and a cousin. Their successive deaths within a short interval gave rise to intense suspicion. Court factions circulated allegations that the deaths were orchestrated by Marthanda Varma's supporters, fueling bitter internal conflict.^9

The Velivilakam elder, known for his integrity and forthright disposition, openly confronted Marthanda Varma, condemning the alleged acts as immoral and politically destructive. Though uninvolved in any conspiracies against the future king, his criticism was remembered and resented. When Marthanda Varma consolidated his authority, he punished several members of the opposing factions. The Velivilakam elder was seized and subjected to punitive measures. Though *mathilakam* records do not list him among the eighty-two executed nobles, evidence suggests he was exiled and stripped of his position.

The broader family consequently suffered political and military disenfranchisement. Their long-standing roles in local governance, military organization, and administrative affairs were systematically curtailed. Nevertheless, during the later reign of Dharma Raja Rama Varma, the family regained partial prominence through renewed privileges in trade and commerce. Despite these reconciliatory gestures, the earlier humiliations fostered enduring resentment, and the family distanced itself from the Travancore royal household, severing ties that had previously linked them—similar to the adoption-based relationships maintained between Travancore and the Kolathiri and Attingal lineages.^10

This episode marked a turning point in the political trajectory of the Velivilakam lineage, shaping its relations with state authority in the centuries that followed.

PART III (Pages 7–9)

VIII. The Installation of the Śiva Idol and Religious Transformation

The transformation of the Kolathukara Temple under the guidance of Sree Narayana Guru represents one of the most significant religious transitions in the history of the Velivilakam family. At that time, the Bhagavathi shrine near the family's principal residence had become a site of fear among local inhabitants. The anxiety was exacerbated by periods of cholera, smallpox, and other epidemics, which were interpreted as manifestations of the goddess's wrath. Villagers avoided the pathway adjoining the temple, particularly on ritual days associated with the Devi, such as Tuesdays and Fridays.^11

Recognizing both the social distress and the psychological burden borne by the community, the elders of the Velivilakam family sought the counsel of Sree Narayana Guru. The Guru, known for his broad reformist vision and emphasis on rational spirituality, advised the replacement of the Devi idol with a Śiva linga. This proposal reflected his larger philosophical message of transcending fear, caste ritualism, and the worship of deities associated with violent or punitive aspects.

An auspicious date was chosen for the reconsecration. Tradition maintains that although several men attempted to remove the old idol, none succeeded. Finally, Sree Narayana Guru himself approached the sanctum and, using only his left hand, shifted the Bhagavathi idol aside before installing the Śiva linga. He then directed that the Devi idol should receive no further puja within the temple. The replacement of the fierce goddess with Śiva signified a turn toward meditative, inward-oriented worship, consistent with the Guru's spiritual ideals.^12

Years later, around 1916, a new temple was constructed at Meenamkulam near Kazhakuttom, and its custodians requested the Guru's permission to install the displaced Bhagavathi idol. Although he permitted the transfer, ritual complications prevented the completion of the *aṣṭabandha* consecration, and the idol was returned to the Kolathukara Temple, where it remains to this day.

IX. Transfer of Temple Management and Decline of the Family Estate

During the Guru's lifetime, the management of the temple was formally transferred from the Velivilakam family to a public committee. This transition reflected the Guru's broader commitment to democratizing religious institutions and reducing the concentration of sacerdotal authority.

The family relinquished not only custodial control but also substantial material support. Approximately six acres of income-generating paddy fields were set aside to fund the daily operations of the temple, though legal title to these lands remained within the family. By this gesture, the Velivilakam household ensured financial stability for temple rituals and festivals long into the twentieth century.^13

The post-independence decades witnessed a significant reorganization of land and institutional ownership in the region. The Sanskrit school founded by the family, along with adjoining land plots, was donated to the Kerala government. Additional acreage was later acquired by the state for expanding educational infrastructure. The eventual development of Technopark transformed much of the family's former paddy fields and agricultural holdings into industrial and commercial spaces, marking a decisive shift from agrarian-temple economies to modern technological urbanization.

Though the physical estate diminished, the family's cultural memory and historical contributions remained deeply embedded in the social landscape. The temple, school, and oral traditions preserved by local inhabitants stand as living testaments to the family's far-reaching influence.

X. Conclusion

The history of the Sree Kulathoor Kolathukara Shiva Temple and the Velivilakam family exemplifies the dynamic interplay of political authority, religious evolution, industrial enterprise, and social transformation in pre-modern and modern Kerala. Emerging as a royal-connected lineage with extensive landholdings and significant industrial capacities, the family shaped regional commerce through textile production and maintained strategic military roles during periods of conflict. Their interactions with Travancore's ruling house—ranging from deep alliance to political tension—reflect the complex nature of aristocratic relations in Kerala's early modern history.

The temple’s transformation under Sree Narayana Guru in the late nineteenth century represents a watershed moment in the region’s religious landscape. Through the replacement of the Bhagavathi idol with a Śiva linga and the establishment of educational institutions, the family aligned itself with Kerala’s wider renaissance movement, embracing social reform, expanding literacy, and questioning fear-based ritual practices.

The gradual decline of the family’s landholdings, culminating in their integration into state infrastructure and modern industrial development, echoes broader patterns of post-colonial transition in Kerala. Yet the endurance of the Kolathukara Temple, the continued reverence for the Guru’s interventions, and the preservation of oral histories ensure that the family’s legacy remains firmly intertwined with the cultural and spiritual identity of the region.

The intertwined histories of the temple and the family thus provide a rare, multilayered perspective on Kerala’s past—one that blends economic enterprise, royal politics, military geography, religious reform, and community identity into a single, continuous narrative.

ENDNOTES (Chicago Style)

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8. Military Palm-Leaf Register of Kulathoor, “Campaign Against Northern Invaders.”
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11. Temple Tradition Ledger, Kolathukara Devi Temple, 19th century.
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